

Gandy Dancer Archives

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 1

5-1-2014

Why Not Know More?

Suraj Uttamchandani
SUNY Geneseo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Uttamchandani, Suraj (2014) "Why Not Know More?," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol2/iss2/1>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gandy Dancer Archives by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.

Why Not Know More?

It is still awkward in the house. Shanti Jana leans one arm on a broom as she stares at a calendar on the refrigerator. It is colorful and government-provided, orange marking the days of trash pick-up and green marking recycling. She places a dark brown finger gently on November, running her finger across the rows until she hits today's date. Her wedding was in August, which means that it has been almost four months since Rajiv, a stranger who spoke perfect Hindi but took his chai with too much milk, arrived at her family's house in Mumbai. It has been three months, then, since she stayed up all night whispering with her mother about whether this was what he wanted, certain that no man would want to take her and her barrenness to America. It has been two and a half months since she woke up in Boston and it has been one hour since she last wondered if her husband was happier living in bachelorhood in America before his parents required that he pick up a wife in India in much the way you stop by the market to pick up chilies and lamb to make for dinner.

Rajiv comes home from the university every night at six o'clock, although once in a while he holds a review session for an Introduction to Physics exam or helps a student who is having difficulties with a problem set. It has not yet been a full semester, so Shanti doesn't know if this will always be her husband's pattern. She lets tonight's *dal* boil as she considers this. She has only been to the university once, on the first weekend she was here—the walk was short but it was chilly—and she did not much care for it. It was efficient to the point of excess. Glass windows. Fancy new computers. Whiteboards with

markers. The whiteboards are perhaps the strangest part, she thinks. She has never seen erasable markers before.

As she adds coriander to the pot, the increased pungency of the kitchen is comforting. Cooking is her most sensory connection to Mumbai since she has come here. The house is small enough that she hears keys turn in the front door's knob, since the lentils are no longer boiling so loudly. Rajiv walks into his house.

"Hello, Shanti," he says in Hindi. He is cordial but not romantic.

Her response is friendly with an afterthought of trepidation: "Hello."

"How was your day?" he asks, as though they have just learned the routine in a Hindi class and are practicing it with a partner for the first time.

"It was nice. I walked to the market. The fish monger gave me a good price."

"Is that what's for dinner?"

"It's Monday." Her response doesn't compute for Rajiv. Since he is not trying to hide his confusion, she continues, "I cannot cook meat in this house on Monday."

Her family has made a long-standing observance of this. For generations, they practiced vegetarianism on Mondays and the *purnima*, the full moon. Her parents have warned her to be flexible with regards to her new life in America, but this is one issue on which she cannot remain docile. After all, she thinks, I should not have to cook an animal merely because my husband has been in America longer. She has no objection to Rajiv eating meat on these days, but she refuses to prepare it. "I made *dal*," she suggests, and moves to set the table. He sits.

She arrives at his office in Alan E. Case Physics Conservatory at the edge of campus with Thai food in a wrinkly brown bag from Phuckett Express. Shanti has wavered slightly from her adherence to an Indian-only diet and is no longer offended by the idea that there might be other good cooks in Massachusetts. She has grown bored of the house and its daily emptiness, so she has taken to bringing lunch to Rajiv and sitting with him. Their talk is still a rare thing—she does tell him a joke that she read in *Miss India* this week and he laughed—but she often watches as he works out equations on a whiteboard using symbols with which she is unfamiliar.

She cannot stop herself from wondering about the validity of his conclusions. They look believable, but how can he deduce perfectly how much cooler a hot plate will be in three hours or how fast a ball will fall from a balcony? There is something about her husband's work, she thinks, that is ludicrously unbelievable. There is so little consistency, so few rules. She is

in America now, she recalls, and does not know whether this fact proves or disproves her theory.

She convinces Rajiv to drive her deeper into the heart of the city, where the cinema has started showing foreign films. A Bollywood movie is playing and Shanti is very excited at the prospect of going. Rajiv, for his part, prefers Hollywood films.

“It will be fun!” she says.

He replies, “Shanti, I have to grade these tests.”

She says, “You never take me out.”

“I didn’t know that mattered to you.”

The room is silent for a quarter of a moment before Shanti feels guilty. He has, after all, provided for her for half a year now.

“It’s not important,” she says.

He gets the car keys.

Boredom permeates the house as Shanti puts the Windex back under the sink. She has only just recently begun to consider the possibility that the house is too small. It can only be cleaned so many times before it fails to get messy again. In the stagnancy, her thoughts go to little ones. Little ones would run around the house, crying, screaming, needing. She would spend thoughts on their education and values and happiness. They would smile and sob often, bundles of blankets that cannot control their emotions. Little ones would make the house messy.

She thinks about what she would name them until she knows she shouldn’t think about it anymore. Four years ago, her body simply stopped ovulating (her mother checked her temperature daily to make sure). Her parents took her to a hospital deep in Mumbai, where the British doctors still were, and they told her that she was barren. Shanti learned long ago that there comes a point where you must stop thinking or you will unravel, and if you cannot produce life you must at least retain your own. She speaks out loud. “*Meh ma kabhi nahi bun sakti.*” It is a phrase she is too familiar with: I can never become a mother.

She goes to the tall bathroom mirror, checks that the sari she is wearing is decent, and leaves the house, stopping at Frank’s Deli to pick up sandwiches and chips before she arrives at Case. After their quiet lunch—she mentions a new recipe she came across this week, and Rajiv expresses interest in trying it—Shanti begins walking home. The library building lies in the auxiliary of her vision every day, but today it pulls her focus more so than usual. She checks her watch but there is nothing she needs to get back to, so she wanders in.

The lobby overloads her senses. There is a couple kissing, pecking each other lightly on the cheeks until their lips finally meet. There is a clattering of the new ivory keyboards. A bell is chiming every few seconds to indicate an elevator arriving on the main floor. She cannot conceive of someone being able to get work done here. After a minute, she turns around and returns home.

Rajiv opens the door into the kitchen, and Shanti is glad of it. Her days are more humdrum than ever and she has grown to love her husband's arrival, enjoying the uncertainty of it. There is a strange thrill in what Rajiv will or will not say on a given day. What mood will he be in: talkative or taciturn? Will the conversation be serious, or polite, or silent altogether?

She quickly concludes that today, Rajiv is talkative. He has picked up the newspaper from the kitchen table and is huffing at certain headlines. This is how he tries to convey to Shanti that there is something on his mind, and she knows this. She continues to play the game, ignoring his huffing until it is so clear that he is trying to get her attention that ignoring it for any longer would just be silly.

"How was your day?" she begins, in their usual way.

"It went well. How was yours?" he replies.

"It was okay. Dull as usual." Shanti's sentiments are no secret to Rajiv.

"It's interesting that you say that. There was that faculty meeting today, the one I told you about? The provost was going on and on about the general curriculum requirements. Professor Cohen, the head of the language department also spoke. It seems they are adding a mandatory foreign language requirement for all students."

"Oh? So the kids will know not just American, but also English?" They laugh lightly.

Rajiv continues, "They're teaching all the European languages, you know, Spanish and French and all that. But they want to have even more options."

The room is silent for a moment, since they both have a sense of where the conversation is going.

"Do you think that they would want someone for Hindi?" Shanti asks.

"You have an interview next week with Professor Cohen."

She has chosen a beautiful sari, one that she has never worn before. She performed a small *pūja* this morning, and, with a red *tilak* on her forehead, she looks as though no time has passed since the day she immigrated to America despite the year between then and now. She carries a spiral notebook and the textbook she has selected—*Namaste! A Friendly Introduction to Hindi Language and Letters*—under her arm. The classroom is larger than

she expects it to be and her figure in the front of it is not at all imposing. She lays her books out on the podium and the doors rattle as someone else enters.

Rajiv is smiling. Shanti imagines he is pleased with the way they teamed up to get her this job. She too is pleased.

“First day!” he begins. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m nervous,” she says. “What if they don’t understand me? What if I don’t do a good job?”

“Peace, Shanti. Come to Case after class and tell me how it went.” A student, the first one, walks into the room, and Rajiv switches to English. “You’ll do fine.”

With that, Rajiv shakes her hand and leaves the room.

She sits quietly in her office, unsure of what to do. The space is small but larger than the bedroom in which she grew up. She puts *Namaste* on the shelf, on its back since there are no other books to help keep it upright. She is out of things to do, so she begins to tidy the barren space, dusting it with the end of her sari. This task is quickly finished, so she looks up at the clock on the wall. She is supposed to be holding office hours, but it has been half an hour and no students have arrived for help. She thinks, would it really be so bad if I leave? Shanti sits at the chair, disquieted by the large desk before her, and begins to whisper-sing a *bajaan* under her breath.

“Repeat after me: *Meh.*”

“*Meh.*”

“*Bharat.*”

“*Bharat.*”

“*Seh.*”

“*Seh.*”

“*Hoon.*”

“*Hoon.*”

“*Meh: I. Bharat. India. Seh: from. Hoon: am. Meh Bharat seh hoon: I am from India. Now, repeat after me: Aap.*”

“*Aap.*”

“*Umreeka.*”

“*Umreeka.*”

“*Seh.*”

“*Seh.*”

“*Hain.*”

“*Hain.*”

“*Aap*: You. *Umreeka*: America. *Seh*: from. *Hain*: are. *Aap Umreeka seh hain*: You are from America.” Shanti pauses for a second, thinking about what she’s just said. The students’ pronunciation was particularly good.

“Professor Jana,” a declarative voice asserts, accompanying a polite knock on Shanti’s office door.

Shanti looks up to see Anna Johnson, a tall sophomore with curly red hair. She looks downtrodden and confused, as though she accidentally put salt in her tea instead of sugar. Her glasses make her look more intelligent, but she is skinny and looks fun-loving as well. “Can I come in?”

“Yes, of course,” Shanti says as she folds the newspaper back in half and places it in the corner of her desk. “Take a seat. What’s troubling you?”

“I have some bad news. I don’t know how to phrase it.”

Shanti wants to say, let me make us some chai and we can discuss whatever it is. Instead she merely gestures for Anna to continue.

“I have to drop Hindi.”

Shanti leans forward slightly, sitting on the edge of her chair. “Why?”

“My parents don’t want me to keep taking it.”

“Why?”

“We got into a fight about it last week over spring break. They didn’t want me using up credits on it since it doesn’t count for anything and I got Spanish credit from high school. I mean, I do want to graduate on time and, well, they’re paying for college so it’s their call. I’m sorry.”

Has Anna not been enjoying the class? Does she think it will never be useful? Shanti’s sadness becomes anger; why sign up in the first place when there are other people who might want this spot? She is suddenly confused. How does someone just stop trying halfway through the term? She chooses silence as Anna reaches into her knapsack and pulls out a manila folder. Inside, there is a small sheet of paper which she hands to Shanti. Printed neatly across the top, she sees *Course Withdrawal Form*, and then below it, Anna’s name and ID number in handwriting that carries a forced formality. She reads *HIND 100—Elementary Hindi I* and then her own name. Below that is a blank line, with small print under it that directs, “Instructor’s signature required.”

Shanti opens a drawer to grab a pen and briefly considers writing in *Devanagari* script, but decides against it and signs. “Have a good day, Anna,” she says, handing back the form as Anna stands and puts her knapsack back over her shoulder.

For dinner, they have lamb kebobs with chutney, cucumbers and bread. She had to extend office hours today, as the students kept coming in, actually waiting outside her office for a good half an hour to fix their pronunciation or ask for clarification. With the extra pull on her time, she is grateful that it is an easy meal to prepare: defrost, stir-fry, chop, toast, and serve. Neither of them has much to say, so dinner is spent mostly in silence.

As they finish up, Shanti rises to begin washing the plates. Rajiv continues eating. Between bites, he begins, "Today, my boss told us about the department meeting next week where we decide which classes each of us is going to teach next year. Has Professor Cohen contacted you yet?"

"No, not yet. Is that bad?"

"No, I'm sure she'll come by in the next day or two."

"So what do I do at this meeting?" Shanti asks, as she squeezes more dish soap onto a sponge.

"Usually everyone just says what they want to teach and then the department chair makes a list of courses that have to be taught and people pick from them. It's not so bad."

Shanti places the last glass in the dishwasher and returns to her seat at the table. "Rajiv, has anybody ever dropped your class halfway through the term?"

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"Have they ever told you why they quit?"

"Mostly because the class was too hard for them."

"Never for any other reasons?"

"No, not that I can think of. Why? What happened?"

Shanti is torn. When she studied history at a university in Mumbai, nobody ever dropped out of a class in the middle of the term. She studied mostly conflict and Indian history, but what might have happened had she enrolled in a Mandarin class? Would her parents have yelled at her? Would they have made her come home and not let her go back? Would they have locked her in her room and jammed a broom under the doorknob out of anger? She considers these, but the idea is too surreal and she somehow cannot believe her mother and father would be so intolerant. Why would they care if she was studying Mandarin, as long as she still went to the *mandir* twice a week for the *puja*, observed a special *aarti* on the full moon, and stayed vegetarian on Mondays? Her father always used to say, "Why not know more?"

Perhaps Rajiv can offer some insight. He has been at the university longer. He has been in America longer. She decides to confide in her husband.

"Today, a student of mine, Anna, came into my office with some news." She tells him what Anna, and her parents, said.

"You know that this must be for the best," Rajiv replies. "And you cannot take these things personally. After all, it's not your fault she dropped. These

things happen. You just have to worry about taking care of the kids who are there.”

Shanti feels like she is supposed to be satisfied with this answer. And intellectually she is, for it is very logical. She still allows herself a short moment of self-pity before rising to wipe the stovetop clean.

It is clearly November on the college green, which is no longer green but covered in red, orange, and amber leaves that wisp about passionately in the wind. Rajiv thinks they are like excited electrons. Shanti thinks they are like children when a mango seller comes into the market, swarming him, pulling their parents by their fingers, already tasting the sweet, tart juice in their mouths, salivating for the fruit’s coolness in the Mumbai heat.

Shanti steps back from the library’s sixth story window towards the corner where foreign language books are shelved. She runs a fragile finger over the spines, looking for a copy of the *Ramayana*. While she is partial to a copy for little children, as she knows that will be the most fun for her class, she will take any copy she can find. She remembered that *Diwali* is coming up in just a few weeks and wants to celebrate in Elementary Hindi I. She has a copy at home, of course, but the idea for a lesson on the significance of the festival of lights just hit her, so she wants to get her hands on a copy of the entertaining epic as soon as possible. For this reason, she trudged through the sensory overload that was the first floor and made her way up here.

As usual, she finds nothing, so she returns to the lift lobby. However, she is shaken. It is her third semester here, but this is the first time she has actually looked for the text on campus. Where is it? This work is not just important for students studying Hindu theology; it is important for anyone who wants a proper college education, she thinks. Even if she never actually read Shakespeare in secondary school, she became intimately familiar with the plots of his stories. In the same way, she thinks, the *Ramayana* is an important story of a great journey to the demon’s kingdom and back. Stealing herself, she pushes the door open, taking the stairs down instead of the elevator. She wants to find her husband, go home, and make a proper four-course meal for them to enjoy. *Samosas*. Chicken Curry. Eggplant *Bhaji*. *Gulab Jamun* for dessert. No fries or chips on the side.

When she reaches the ground floor, she leaves the library and heads towards Case. Then she reconsiders, wanting to be alone, and doubles back towards her own office.

In their bedroom, Shanti is folding the laundry while Rajiv watches the news. They are both in their post-dinner routines: Rajiv is catching up on the world’s events while Shanti catches up on the chores she’s neglected. She plac-

es the last towels in the closet and, tasks completed, returns to the room. Rajiv is absorbed in the news, but Shanti has only a passing interest in it. She pulls the covers over herself and reaches for the *Ramayana* that she usually keeps on the nightstand. It is a favorite book to her; she reads the same passages again and again and never stops appreciating them. It isn't there, though, and she suddenly knows exactly where it is: on the corner of her desk in the office. Somewhat annoyed, she turns to Rajiv.

"Rajiv, I can't find my copy of the *Ramayana*. Where's yours?"

"Hmmm?" Rajiv lowers the volume and looks at her. "Oh, I don't have one."

"But you've read it, right?"

"Yeah, my mother read it to me when I was young. I myself have never actually read it though." Footage of a fire erupts on the screen and Rajiv raises the volume.

Shanti makes a note to buy him a copy for his next birthday then rolls over to pick up an issue of *People* from the floor.

A glass has crashed to the ground. Shanti was asleep, but wakes with a start, much in the way a mother wakes when she hears her baby crying. Monday morning doesn't usually sneak up on her, but she stayed up late last night with her students' papers. The 100-word compositions are their last assignment before the final and she wanted to give the papers back today so that the students have all week to study them. The clock glares at her: she has slept twenty-seven minutes later than she should have. She comes to her senses and rustles out of bed. A shawl hangs behind the door and she grabs it on her way downstairs.

Rajiv is furiously sweeping the floor with a broom and dustpan. He looks up and a pained look crosses his face. "Oh, I didn't mean to wake you," he says.

"It's fine, I should have been up sooner anyway. What broke?"

"A teacup." He picks up the dustpan and throws the tinkling remnants away.

"What were you doing with a teacup?"

"I was making the chai this morning."

It occurs to Shanti that she was not up early enough to make the morning cup of tea. Then a second, sillier thought occurs, and she is surprised to find herself voicing it. "You know how to make chai?"

"Of course. Remember, I lived by myself before you got here." Rajiv smiles and gets another cup from the cabinet, pours the remaining chai from the pot into it, and adds milk. "I made your cup."

Shanti watches him. He still adds too much milk, she thinks as she sits at the table and accepts the drink. The kitchen is warm, but the idea of winter is chilly to her and she wraps her fingers around the cup gratefully. She sips it. Hmm, she thinks. Perhaps a little heavy on the cardamom, but otherwise surprisingly good. She makes a note to add more of the spice than usual to his cup tomorrow. Shanti asks Rajiv if he wants toast for breakfast. He asks instead for a ham and cheese sandwich. She reminds him that it is Monday.

The room is silent except for pages turning. The students are studying at the last possible minute for the final exam. When Shanti walks in, they look up. Tucked under her arm is a spiral notebook, a large stack of exam booklets, their textbook, the *Ramayana*, the latest *Miss India*, the latest *People* magazine, and today's copy of the *Boston Globe*. She will have plenty of time to read during the exam. She moves to the front of the room and places the large pile of papers on the desk.

"*Namaste!*" she says. She briefly considers explaining the directions for the final exam in Hindi but decides that she'll spare her students and speaks English, clarifying the details of the identification, vocabulary, letter connection, dictation, and grammar sections of the test.

The students scribble while she reads. She reads about the crisis in Lebanon. She reads a few of her favorite verses of the *Ramayana*, where Hanuman leaps across the ocean to Lanka. She reads movie reviews in *People* and interviews with actors in *Miss India*. She browses the textbook and a copy of the exam one last time to make sure the test is fair.

After about two hours, the students begin to leave, and after the three hour exam period is done, Shanti stands up and tells the seven remaining students to pass in their exams. She notices Rajiv in the doorframe of the classroom. As the students file out, (looking mostly pleased with themselves, Shanti notes), Rajiv files in.

"Hello, Shanti. Are you ready to go?" he asks. They both have finished administering exams for the day and have decided to go to the cinema in the city and catch a Bollywood flick.

"I will be in just a second," she says, as she packs up her things. "Which movie do you want to see?"

"Any one is fine with me, whichever one you have heard is good."

Shanti considers the movies that she read about in *Miss India*. Then she realizes that there are a few she read about in *People* that looked surprisingly interesting that Rajiv might like more. Besides, she has to grade fifty final exams in Hindi tomorrow. Maybe it's better to enjoy a movie in English. She offers this suggestion to Rajiv.

"Are you sure?"

“Yes, Rajiv. Whichever one you want.”

He smiles, and she smiles too. She looks around to make sure there are no students lingering and kisses her husband. Then she gathers her sari around her, picks up her books, and follows Rajiv out of the classroom. She hits the lights on her way out and they begin walking home. As they walk, she spots the library in the periphery of her vision. All of a sudden, an idea occurs to her. “Rajiv, can we stop in the library for one minute?”

They walk in and, though packed, the library is buzzing with the silence of studying students. Shanti and Rajiv walk up to the service desk where a student is reading a textbook. Shanti shuffles through her papers and finds the *Ramayana*. She tells the perplexed student, “I’d like to donate this to the library’s collection, please.”

The student seems underprepared to handle the situation at hand. Shanti smiles amiably. Her hand brushes Rajiv’s as they prepare to leave. “It’s important for the library to have it,” she says, “And there’s space on the sixth floor.”